HOMELAND SECURITY
COMMITTEE

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Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communication Subcommittee
House Homeland Security Committee

Food For Thought: Efforts to Defend the Nation's Agriculture and Food
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Remarks as Prepared

Throughout this Congress, the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications has taken a deep dive into the world of biological terrorism. We have held hearings to assess the biological threat, understand the scope of the biodefense problem, and examine federal programs aimed at tackling some of the biodefense challenges.

Our oversight thus far has primarily been on the human impacts of biological terrorism. Today we are going to take a different perspective and look at the impacts to the nation from a terrorist attack on, or natural disruption of, our agricultural or food systems.

An agroterrorism attack would impact the most basic of human needs—the food we eat. Furthermore, the food and agriculture sector is critically important to our nation's economy. U.S. food and agriculture accounts for roughly one-fifth of the nation's economic activity, contributed $835 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014, and is responsible for one out of every 12 U.S. jobs. In my home state of Arizona, ranching and agriculture contributes around $10 billion a year to the State's economy.

An intentional attack or natural disruption of U.S. agriculture or food, therefore, would present a serious threat to this nation and cause major economic damages on a number of levels. There will be costs related to containing disease and destruction of livestock, compensating farmers for loss of agricultural commodities and losses in other related industries, and trade embargoes imposed by other nations.

Intelligence indicates that terrorists have discussed vulnerabilities in various components of the sector. Food and agriculture is an attractive target to terrorists because many agents are easy to obtain, minimal technology is required to execute an attack, and our food travels across the country and world quickly and efficiently.

Furthermore, even if there are few human casualties, an agroterrorism attack would also undermine public confidence in government, increasing general concerns about the safety of our food supply as well as the effectiveness of biological defense planning. This goes to the heart of what we know groups like ISIS are trying to do—terrorize by any means possible.

We need only look at the impacts of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), a natural event, to see how devastating an intentional act against our food or agriculture could be. Last year's outbreak of HPAI was the largest animal health incident in U.S. history, resulting in over $3 billion in economic losses and the slaughtering of 48 million birds to stem the spread of disease. Eighteen trading partners banned all imports of U.S. poultry and products and an additional 28 trading partners imposed partial bans.

This outbreak and its rapid farm-to-farm spread highlighted the challenges the sector faces related to effective biosecurity, especially during a large scale response.

We must ensure we are able to assess our level of preparedness for any type of major disruption to U.S. food or agriculture. Our goal today is to gain a better understanding of what government, along with academia and the private sector, are doing to reduce vulnerabilities of the food and agricultural sector to a terrorist attack.
We hope to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem, and identify ways in which we as Members of Congress focused on homeland security issues can help prevent attacks and improve our readiness and ability to respond.

I hope to hear about information sharing with government. Is food and agriculture engaged in our processes including fusion centers? Are you getting the threat and risk information you need? I also want to understand your connectedness to the human health side of things—are our current biosurveillance systems integrating the human, animal, and plant data to form a true "One Health" picture?

With that, I welcome our witnesses. I look forward to your testimony.

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